

# National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing



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Jack O'Connell  
State Superintendent of Public Instruction  
California Department of Education  
1430 N Street  
Sacramento, CA 95814-5901

Dear Superintendent O'Connell:

As early participants in the discussions and design options surrounding CAHSEE, we at the UCLA Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) support effective and fair accountability. We are encouraged that California is ready to take a second look at the technical expectations for exit examinations. We encourage a close reading of the revision of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1999), which serves as a touchstone for test design and implementation as well as for litigation surrounding the use of tests in high-stakes settings. These precepts have been summarized and elaborated by the Board on Testing and Assessment of the National Research Council, the CRESST *Standards for Educational Accountability Systems*, and a number of professional organizations. Among the standards is that no student should be denied certification or access based on a single test (which means more than multiple trials at the same measure). The reason for the standard involves fairness (all students should have adequate preparation) and the inexorable measurement error in every test.

CRESST's Accountability Standards and publications of the Board on Testing and Assessment of the National Research Council discuss construct irrelevant variance, which in part means whether performance is attributable to instruction or to unrelated skills, for example, language differences or disabilities. In California the language issue is salient given our diverse student body. Because California does not monitor the nature of classroom instruction, it is presently difficult to meet the intention of the standard.

California stands out, unfortunately, as a state that has not adopted alternative state means for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in addition to the use of a high school exit examination. Among other options used elsewhere are:

- Alternative tests (college entry examinations, AP tests, military entrance examinations, and tests offered in students' native languages)
- Coursework that reflects state learning standards, at specific levels of achievement
- Locally developed performance assessments, including portfolios, senior projects, student work samples, and performance tasks
- State-developed performance assessments, including performance tasks and student work samples scored using state rubrics

Each of these strategies has strengths and limitations. Given the goals that the California State Department of Education has expressed for the exit examination in this state, we propose that the state develop, as an alternative for all students who fail the exit exam, a set of performance assessments linked to the state learning standards that can be administered and scored locally using state-established standards. This approach, which has been adopted in Washington, Oregon, and New Jersey, among other states, has the virtue of providing tasks that are comparable and clearly linked to state standards and that are also responsive to different learning approaches. New Jersey's strategy is worthy of particular note, as it requires districts to provide remedial coursework as well as performance assessment alternatives to students who fail the exit exam. Thus, the system promotes focused learning opportunities addressing the state's standards. The performance tasks clearly reflect the standards, provide multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and maintain student effort, engagement, and learning. New Jersey is one of the few exit examination states that has both increased its graduation rates, which are among the highest in the nation, and has high and increasing student achievement in reading and mathematics. Thus, its strategy appears to have raised standards without pushing students out of school.

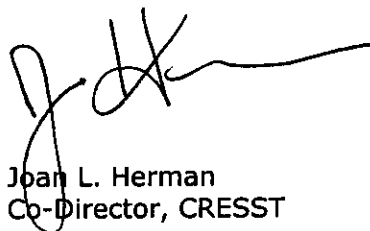
There are a variety of ways that such alternatives could be structured. Performance tasks could include a set of discrete tasks representing specific standards, as in New Jersey; a more integrated assessment such as a senior project that addresses multiple standards in one larger task, as in Pennsylvania; or a collection of student work samples developed to demonstrate specific skills and scored using state standards, as in Washington and Oregon. Any of these approaches could be designed to ensure equivalent assessments in standards domains. At the current moment, the first approach may be most feasible to implement statewide. We recommend that the state immediately examine the development and implementation of a statewide performance assessment alternative, building on the successful experiences of other states. The details of any alternative approach and its technical quality would be a focus of attention for California.

Naturally an immediate solution needs to be found for the 2005-2006 school year, and it is our bet that it will include the use of other relevant information such as course-taking. We are interested in providing support as needed to the state to assure that any such changes meet technical standards of validity and reliability as well as continue to support the credibility of the State's accountability program.

Sincerely,



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